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ABSTRACT

Although over half of the states in the United States have implemented minimum competency testing (MCT) programs, problems continue to be reported by researchers. Educators have been concerned with these problems since the beginning of MCT. Accounts of testing problems include: (1) Durham, North Carolina students who fail the state-mandated test must attend summer school; (2) kindergarten children may be retained until certain prereading competencies are demonstrated, resulting in poor self-esteem and inappropriate emphasis on reading skills rather than on individual abilities or reading for pleasure; (3) physicians often have passed tests but lack interpersonal skills; (4) MCT influences curriculum content; and (5) Irish teachers tended not to promote weaker students in order to control the test failure rate. Suggested improvements include attention to the needs and abilities of individual students; modification of tests for special students; emphasis on improving teaching and learning rather than bureaucracy; item response scaling in computer-assisted adaptive testing; emphasis on diagnosis; and use of teacher-developed evaluations. (GDC)

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Negative Aspects of Minimum Competency Testing Continue to Surface: Implications

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Negative Aspects of Minimum Competency Testing Continue to Surface: Implications

For a number of years now minimum competency has been a major force in American education, and it continues to be so. More than half of our states have, in either state board or legislative action, required or permitted schools to identify the minimum basic skills that should be acquired by children attending the elementary and secondary schools.

Fortunately, through continuing research, negative aspects of minimum competency are still surfacing. A disturbing fact, however, is that many dedicated teachers were aware of numerous negative effects of minimum competency testing from the time of its inception. It is felt that Pipho's (11) remark made some years ago, expresses teachers' feelings very well. He said, "Perhaps at no other time in the history of American education have we ever had an idea adopted by so many states so quickly -- an idea supported by non-educators and opposed by educators." However, throughout the years that minimum competency has been given a high priority, concerned educators have been busy trying to improve the program in the best interests of students, and it is encouraging to learn that some noteworthy programs have resulted.

It is felt, however, that complacency must not "take over" on the basis of improvements in minimum competency programs through the work of researchers and concerned educators because there seems to be a great need for more widespread improvement.

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Consider this information regarding school promotions, reported by Mark Andrews (1), and found in The Durham Morning Herald on March 25, 1986:

> The Durham City school board changed its promotion policy Monday night to include state standards for achievement tests taken in third, sixth and eighth grades.
>
> The state has said that students must score at the 25th percentile or higher on the California Achievement Test to pass it.
>
> Students who fall below the standard set on that test will have to go to summer school unless they pass a second test that the state is still putting together.

Several questions, some of which follow, seem worth considering:

1. Children have been known to score differently on different achievement tests; on what basis was the California Achievement Test selected?

2. The 25th percentile seems low; was the saving of money the reason for this selection?

3. Is mandated summer school in the best interest of children and their families?

4. Could the money involved be more wisely spent?

In the same edition of the The Durham Morning Herald, Diane Fisher (4) reported that the Durham County school board approved amending its promotion policy to include the state-mandated summer school program. Might this policy give some children a negative attitude towards all schooling?

In discussing some possible reasons for the shift in emphasis, in the North Carolina kindergartens, from a child-centered approach to "academics", Murray and Barnes (10) offered,

as one possible reason, the minimum competency program which "has exerted pressure on local units to retain children at the kindergarten level until certain competencies have been demonstrated." It is felt that this is a sad commentary on education as the humanitarian sense seems utterly lacking. Consider this case:

A young man who had just become an ensign in the United States Navy confessed that he had failed kindergarten, and for years after that, if a teacher complimented him on a piece of work well done, these seemingly indelible thoughts popped up in his mind, "You CAN'T mean it! I'm DUMB! I MUST be! I FAILED kindergarten!"

The Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, the International Reading Association and the National Association for the Education of Young Children, the National Association of Elementary School Principals, and the National Council of Teachers of English (13) have just issued a joint statement on literacy development and pre-first grade. They have listed nine concerns which, unfortunately, are currently being violated in some of our schools. A small sampling of the concerns is offered:

1. Many pre-first grade children are subjected to rigid, formal pre-reading programs with inappropriate expectations and experiences for their level of development.
2. Little attention is given to individual development or individual learning styles.

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5. Too little attention is placed upon reading for

pleasure; therefore, children often do not associate reading with enjoyment.

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At a recent visit to a large hospital, it was learned from an "official" that the biggest problem with the young resident doctors is human relations. They have the "smarts"; they can pass the tests; but they need help in their relations with people. This raises a question, "Is too much emphasis still placed on test passing?"

Walstad (14), in undertaking a study to examine the impact of school district resources and policy changes on basic skills performance, found that the educational process, in districts where state-mandated minimum competency programs existed, appeared significantly changed. Many districts reported modifying the curriculum, conducting workshops for teachers on minimum competency testing, and administering pretesting to students. Reportedly, only the pretesting increased basic skill scores by a sizable amount.

Pretesting has been viewed as being of limited educational value. Be that as it may, the purpose of Walstad's study was not to judge pretesting as good or bad, as he sees that as depending on the values of decision makers. His results suggest that minimum competency testing is likely to change the educational operations in many school districts and that the decision makers will have to decide if these changes are among the intended

outcomes of the program and thus enable them to decide whether to adopt, abandon, or modify minimum competency testing.

Madaus and Greaney (8), in writing about the Irish experience in competency testing, stated that some teachers "tended to emphasize subject areas covered by the examination to the detriment of other subjects." They also found that "the content of previous examinations came to define the curriculum" and that "teachers tended to adopt a policy of not promoting weaker pupils in order to control the potential failure rate on the examination."

Madaus and Greaney concluded that "the Irish experience should at the very least offer warning signals to American educators on the possible dangers inherent in the use of minimum competency tests as the sole determinant of decisions concerning grade-to-grade promotions."

Barbara Kohlfield (7) undertook a research study "to survey the opinions of an informed person in each of the 50 states regarding various aspects and issues of minimum competency testing." These research participants all knowledgeable about minimum competency testing in their state were selected from Pipho's publication, Update VIII: Minimum Competency Testing (1979). Each participant was sent an opinionaire and though some agreed with some of the items reflecting current state practices, a significant number "viewed minimum competency from a different perspective regarding its implementation and uses."

Teachers have openly admitted teaching to the tests;

researchers have found this to be true; and Kohlfeld is no exception. She found that "eighty percent of the research participants agreed or strongly agreed that the basic skills will be the main focus of the curriculum if students have to pass competency tests in them."

Her concluding statements about her findings suggest "a preference for using minimum competency tests in a more realistic and encompassing manner." She adds the following:

> First we must recognize that students are individuals. They learn at different rates and in different ways. Second, we must recognize that minimum competency tests can also be used as indicators of the effectiveness of the school programs and personnel. Rather than using time and money to administer a test to a student, it would be more feasible and certainly more intelligent to use minimum competency tests for larger aims of helping students reach educational goals and aiding school personnel with information concerning how they might do their jobs more effectively.

For years the uniqueness of each child has been given top priority by concerned educators. Nor surprisingly, the research participants in Kohlfield's study "favored using multiple standards which recognize the inherent differences among students." Their preference was that students should be assessed as individuals rather than as a group. This, then, would call for multiple standards as opposed to a single standard in establishing acceptable performances, but it would be in keeping with recognizing and respecting the uniqueness of each individual.

Most teachers can remember saying, or having heard said by a fellow teacher, entirely different remarks to two students

earning the same grades - say 70% - on the same test. To one the remark was probably, "John, I'm proud of you." To the other, it may well have been, "Jim, I'm disappointed in your grade because I know you can do better."

Harold Berlak (2), U. S. Secretary of Public Education Information Network, "an independent, voluntary association that fosters exchange of knowledge and information among those actively engaged in grassroots reform that fosters equity and excellence," has said, "The heavy dependence on standardization testing in the U.S. schools hurts the quality of education and contradicts our democratic goals." He explained,

> First, the practice of democracy depends on a system of public education that educates ALL children to the very highest standard. We reject outright the belief that children from any cultural group or socio-economic class have limited potential because of their parents' educational history, social background, or values. Second, in a democracy every person has the right and the responsibility to participate directly in the control and reform of public institutions.

He cited several forms of evaluation which might be more educationally useful, among them group and individual diagnoses of student achievement and potential; portfolios and profiles; and school site evaluation teams.

In their assessment of minimum competency in fifth grade learning disabled students, Grise, Beattie, and Algozzine (5) found that test modifications make a difference. Their modifications included "enlarged print, altered item order, unjustified lines in reading passages, and example/item ratio." They concluded, "In general learning disabled students performed well

on the modified tests; performance on regular-print and large-print versions were similar."

Walt Haney (6), in a preface to his article concerned with making testing more educational, probably expressed teachers' feelings quite well. He wrote, "Exemplary testing programs emphasize improvement of teaching and learning rather than bureaucracy." Immediate and specific feedback, generally recognized by educators as extremely important in learning, doesn't happen in most testing programs.

Who makes the tests is another concern. Haney has said, "It seems almost inevitable that any externally developed test is going to have a fairly imperfect fit with the educational goals of a particular teacher or school."

Haney explained item response scaling which, apparently, is becoming more popular in testing circles and is resulting in more efficient testing which in turn should result in better teaching and learning. His explanation follows:

> Item response scaling has found a natural application in computerized adaptive testing. In this form of testing, students are given test items via computer and, depending on their performance on the first dozen or so items, subsequent items presented are either harder or easier. In theory, this sort of procedure may allow more efficient testing in that individuals' performance levels on well-specified traits may be estimated with a given level of accuracy by administering a smaller number of items.

Throughout decades of educational experience, it was noted that the wide grade range of some tests, 3-10, for example

furnished little information about students' ability, especially at the extremes. As a matter of fact, even a smaller range such as 3-5 left a lot to be desired in the way of information that would be helpful in instruction.

Haney's report, based on a survey of the testing programs in a number of schools, indicated that teachers are both willing and able to do reflective thinking concerning testing programs and seem to feel that, in the interest of the children they serve, tests should go beyond "scoring, scaling and reporting and deal with the examination of and experimentation with our educational assumptions, ideas and practices."

It is felt that Haney's final statement, if put into practice, would benefit both students and teachers. It follows:

"It is much more important to engage the judgment and concern of people directly involved -- students, teachers and parents -- in testing ideas and expectations about teaching and learning."

Kohlfeld, too, found teachers open-minded about testing. She reported, "Ninety-three percent of the research participants agreed or strongly agreed that competency tests given as part of the total school program will aid administrators in making decisions concerning curriculum changes, course selection and faculty in-service training." As a matter of fact, there was no one who strongly disagreed.

The differences in opinions that exist among educators themselves are not insurmountable. An example follows:

The very titles of two separate articles appearing in a reputable educational periodical are indicative of differing opinions. The title of Edys S. Quellmalz's (12) article is, "Needed: Better Methods for Testing Higher-Order Thinking Skills," and the title of Arthur Whimbey's (15) is, "You Don't Need a Special 'Reasoning' Test to Implement and Evaluate Reasoning Training."

Quellmalz wrote, "Assessments of student thinking should be based on a core of essential skills that apply to academic, everyday, and novel situations, and should include a variety of test items that require sustained reasoning." The essay-type question was mentioned as a way to determine if students can reach and explain their conclusions. Needless to say, criteria regarding the scoring must be agreed upon. Seemingly, this isn't impossible because it is known that the essay-type question has been added to some tests.

Whimbey wrote, "Most of the aptitude and achievement tests already in use do an adequate job of assessing thinking abilities. He mentioned the WASI Test which is composed of analytical thinking problems such as:

1. Elephant is to small as _____ is to _____.

large	little
turtle	slow
hippopotamus	mouse
lion	timid

2. 3 9 5 11 33 29 ___ ___

Whimbey supported his thinking by stating that though the

test contains no algebra or reading, it correlated .70 with the algebra subtest and .76 with reading comprehension.

Key issues in the minimum competency programs are public support and public expectations; therefore, if educators wish the support to continue, they must come to some agreement as to implementation and uses of the test results.

Ron Brandt (3) who admits there is no easy solution to the testing problem has offered several things which might be done:

1. Reduce the number of separate tests and make better use of test results by developing consolidated assessment programs that serve several functions simultaneously.

2. Make greater use of formative testing aimed at individual and program improvement.

3. Experiment with computerized adaptive testing to get better diagnostic information, reduce student frustration from inappropriate items, save testing time, and have the results immediately.

4. Support budding efforts to measure higher-level thinking as well as more basic facts and skills.

5. Give more attention to teacher-developed classroom assessment.

6. In collaboration with parents and citizens, gather and communicate evidence other than test results that show what students are learning.

Brandt's suggestions are in keeping with the thoughts of this writer, but she wishes to enlarge upon a couple of the points.

Point 3. Better diagnostic information is extremely important for improved instruction. On tests using multiple choice questions, virtual non-readers have earned a score which would deny their reading status and, therefore, was of no help to the

teacher and probably frustrating to the student. James R. McBride (9) has written, "Assessment, diagnosis, and placement by computer may soon replace paper-and-pencil testing." This is promising and worth considering.

Point 5. Attention to teachers' assessment of children is long overdue. Good teachers have often made their own tests to see if they have taught a topic well. Some have reported good results using formative tests during instruction.

Point 6. Give the public something other than test scores. Report on how instruction has been improved through use of test results -- perhaps expanded and accelerated programs for some children, remedial programs for others and even initial teaching for still others -- non-readers, for example.

Finally, years of personal educational experience have been convincing in the fact that there is no one way to teach ALL children and no one test suitable for ALL children. It is sincerely felt that it behooves educators to convince the public that they teach children, each of which is unique. Then, perhaps, all schools can use tests, certainly a legitimate tool of our trade, in a way that benefits both the learner and the teacher and satisfies the public that their money is being well spent.

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